


State-and-regional

Sagebrush project creates landscape of cooperation

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RUSH VALLEY, Utah (AP) — The distrust and ongoing litigation often entrenched in the relationship between the federal government and the state of Utah over public lands management was nowhere to be found among the sagebrush in Tooele County recently.

A nearly \$1 million effort to restore sage grouse habitat in the Sheeprocks area of Rush Valley is unfolding with the efforts of the Utah Department of Natural Resources and 14 other partners — including federal agencies like the Bureau of Land Management and the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Utah.

The work is important and matters on so many levels because the continued health and improvement of greater sage grouse populations means it stays off the endangered species list — and that means greater autonomy over the land.

Both state and federal employees noted the progress made so far during a tour, surveying a western desert landscape full of fallen pinyon-juniper woodlands violently uprooted in an assault by heavy equipment.

In one removal method ominously called “mastication,” live trees are ground into nothing more than a pile of wood chips, all in a matter of minutes.

The vegetation removal helps the imperiled bird, improves the ability of desired grasses and other plants to thrive and boosts the overall health of the watershed by curtailing erosion and helping with groundwater recharge.

“To me, what really saved us and pushed things forward is when everyone sat in a room together” to address the problems on the landscape, said rancher and farmer Elizabeth B. Mitchell.

Mitchell's ancestors started working the land in the 1880s, an area that at one time strained under the pressure of more than 100,000 horses, sheep and cattle.

That has changed over time, and ranchers and farmers are now working in tandem with government soil specialists, wildlife biologists and botanists to improve landscape health, instituting improvements such as rotational grazing, protection of streams and putting in pipelines to move cattle from place to place.

Today's immediate threats to the fragile sagebrush steppe ecosystem have shifted to the onslaught of invasive grasses and pervasive wildfires — six large scale fires over the last three years prompted the rehabilitation of 16,000 acres in the Sheeprocks area.

"The neat thing about this effort is how much private dollars are going into it because (the partners) have caught the vision," said the state Department of Natural Resources' deputy director Robyn Pearson. "If we can stop these fires, it is not money that will be pumped down a hole."

Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, in its 11th year, is shepherding the effort to improve the Sheeprocks.

Over the last decade, more than 93,000 acres have been restored under the initiative.

The area is home to a sage grouse population that, contrary to other management areas in the state, is seeing a decline in numbers.

Alison Whittaker, a habitat conservation specialist with the state, said the pinyon-juniper woodlands is a chief culprit in the species' decline.

"One of our main goals is to push pinyon-juniper back up the hill where it belongs," she said.

The encroachment of the woodlands into sagebrush landscapes causes a number of problems. The trees allow a perch for predators of the sage grouse, so the birds instinctively avoid the area. Additionally, the root system of the pinyon-juniper is like a sponge, soaking up the water that does hit the arid landscape or capturing snow and enabling much of it to be lost to evaporation.

The greater sage grouse needs the sage brush to survive — in the winter it is its only available food source.

Over the last few months, the agencies worked with private landowners and initiated their own restoration efforts, with the Forest Service bringing on local contractors Giles Construction to unleash the bull hogging — or mastication machine — on dense stands of pinyon-juniper.

Restoration of the greater sage grouse in Sheeprocks involves more than just man-handling the trees, of course. Another effort that includes Utah's state wildlife agency and Utah State University successfully relocated 40 sage grouse to the Sheeprocks management area this spring from northern Utah, with researchers and biologists planning to track some of the bird's movements with VHF radio-collars or GPS backpacks.

Nathan Schwebach, spokesman for the state's natural resources department, said the often public controversies over land management gives the impression that state government and federal agencies are "always at each other's throats."

While he admits there are often tough conversations, he said it is initiatives like the one being carried out at Sheeprocks that demonstrates the results of successful collaboration.

The tour was followed up with a day-long workshop in Salt Lake City hosted by the Bureau of Land Management and being held throughout the West in states with sage grouse populations.

The mood was testy at times — the U.S. Department of Interior's deputy assistant secretary Jim Lyons got an earful from frustrated county and state officials — but he said the goal was to hear concerns and issues early on before the federal agency implements sage grouse management plans.

Lyons said he understands the local frustration, which is part of what is driving the workshops being held around the West.

"Our goal is to make sure that any guidance we provide is flexible enough to deal with local conditions."



AP photo

A bull hog, or rotating masticator, mulches a pinion juniper tree during a tour of a wildlands restoration project at the Sheeprocks Sage-grouse Management Area in Tooele County on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest on April 21.